



Press Release

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Oldest human remains and oldest art from the North Sea

Spectacular Ice Age discoveries from submerged prehistoric North Sea landscape

A fragment of a human skull from the collection of the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities (RMO) and a decorated bison bone, both from the North Sea bed, are rare finds from the end of the last Ice Age. After studying both finds, Dutch archaeologists have concluded that these finds are over 13,000 years old and, as such, form the earliest known modern human from the Netherlands and the oldest art from the North Sea. During the Ice Age, the North Sea was a large plain and not a sea, so this discovery yields important clues regarding the colonisation and occupation of this vast sunken landscape and the early cultural expressions of the last hunters of the Ice Age.

The 'oldest Dutchman' is a fragment of a left parietal bone of a skull dating back over 13,000 years. It is the oldest find of a modern human from the North Sea and was discovered by fishermen near the Dutch coast, south of the dredged navigation channel known as the Eurogeul. Physical anthropological research indicates the fragment belonged to an adult, who may have suffered and recovered from a condition such as anemia. The chemical composition of the bone confirms that hunted foods were an important contribution to the daily diet of this individual. The fragment was donated to the National Museum of Antiquities by the North Sea Fossils group in 2013.

The decorated bison bone is slightly older: 13,500 years. It was fished from the North Sea, south of the Brown Bank. It was given as a long-term loan to the National Museum of Antiquities by a private collector. The piece is a fragment of a metatarsal with a striking zig-zag decoration on five panels. It is the earliest piece of art to come from the North Sea. The artefact's function remains unknown. Possibly it was a handle of a tool, or a ritual object. There are three comparably decorated finds found large distances from each other, in Wales, France and Poland. This distance is a compelling reminder of the elaborate mobility and contact networks of the late Ice Age humans. The geometrical and abstract style of the decoration differs from older, more naturalistic and figurative art, as is known from the French caves, amongst others. This change of style may represent important changes in mobility and social organisation of these hunter-gatherers.

The research of the finds was conducted by a team of archaeologists from the National Museum of Antiquities, the Faculty of Archaeology of Leiden University, the Doggerland Research Group, the STONE Foundation and others. The C14 dates were analysed at Groningen University.

At the end of the last Ice Age, about 13,000 years ago, sea levels were 60-80 meters (c. 200-260 feet) below their current situation and most of the North Sea was dry land. In this vast landscape modern humans hunted roaming deer, elk and bison. The remains of humans, fauna and artefacts sometimes end up in fishing nets or are deposited on the beaches, for example, during coastal reinforcement. While the Leiden North Sea finds are not directly connected, they are very rare relicts of a crucial period in the deep history of this area. The end of the last Ice Age is when the northern parts of Europe were again colonised by people from the south. This happened at a time of dynamic climate and environmental change and underlines the resourcefulness of our ancestors to deal with these circumstances.

The North Sea finds demonstrate that its seabed is very rich in important archaeological finds and sites. It is a vast and largely undiscovered prehistoric European heartland. Further research and protection of its vital heritage is of a huge international importance for archaeology, palaeontology and heritage in general.



Note for the editor

For general information you may contact the National Museum of Antiquities in the Netherlands (RMO), Selkit Verberk, PR, Marketing and Communications Department, 071-5 163 164, communicatie@rmo.nl

Images with captions and credits are obtainable from www.rmo.nl/pers.

The scientific research of both finds was recently published in the scientific archaeological journal 'Antiquity' (2018/92 361: 22-37), in the article 'What lies beneath ... Lateglacial human occupation of the submerged North Sea landscape', by Amkreutz, L., A. Verpoorte, A. Waters-Rist, M. Niekus, V. van Heekeren, A. van der Merwe, H. van der Plicht, J. Glimmerveen, D. Stapert and L. Johansen. See this link: <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2017.195>

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